New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1955

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1955 PRODUCTIONS

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of January 24, 1955*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Time of Your Life"

New York Post

January 20, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Return of a Delightful Play

William Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life" is an enchanting play. A kind of philosophical vaudeville show, it brings together in a San Francisco waterfront saloon a fine group of raffish and loveable characters and lets them talk of their hopes and dreams and speculate about life to their hearts' content. It is warm and imaginative, humorous and touching, gay and sad and amazingly sweet in its respect for the dignity of troubled people. I think it is one of the most delightful comedies of the modern theater.

Since, as you may have read between the lines, "The Time of Your Life" is a play for which I have great fondness, I was happy to see it revived last night at the City Center as the third item of the current season there. But, being such an enthusiast for Mr. Saroyan's unashamedly romantic little poem to humanity, I may be a bit stern in judging the way in which it is done on the stage, and I thought the Center production was somewhat lackadaisical and wanting in pace and richness of style. Happily, though, the quality of the play shines through.

I wish I could think that the large and rather fancy audience gathered together for the first night was composed of ardent Saroyan addicts. But I'm afraid that you and I know better. It was the presence in the cast of Gloria Vanderbilt, making her first local stage appearance, that caused the tumult, if not the shouting, and so, in the interest of news, I should report that Miss Vanderbilt comes on in the second act for about two minutes, looks very attractive, does the play no visible harm and may some day be an actress. She's pleasantly modest about it.

In the original production, Eddie Dowling had the leading role of Joe, the amiably alcoholic philanthropist, and Julie Haydon was Kitty, the spiritual prostitute, and both of them were so memorably close to perfection that I'll probably never quite accept anyone else in either part. But Franchot Tone is a highly acceptable substitute for Mr. Dowling and Lenka Peterson had the proper quality for Miss Haydon's role, and it is something of a tribute to them that, despite my memories, I found them satisfactory.

All of the characters in the play, save Blick, the villain from the vice squad, are natural-born philosophers, and they provide fine roles for good actors. Harold Lang, in the role Gene Kelly created, as a dancing philosopher, John Randolph as a longshoreman philosopher, Mike Kellin, as a cop philosopher, Myron McCormick as a philosophical barkeeper, and Lonny Chapman, as Joe's aide, who isn't much given to philosophy, were particularly happy in their parts, while John Carradine was only slightly less good than Arthur Hunnicutt once was as old Kit Carson, who had loved a midget weighing 39 pounds. I liked Biff McGuire in a small role.

One of my favorite scenes is the wistful little episode between Joe and the girl called Mary L., and Carol Grace, as Carol Saroyan is currently named, manages it touchingly. What is probably my second-favorite scene has no words, but weaves a haunting spell as an old Arab plays a harmonica, Samuel Benskin joins him at the piano and Harold Lang goes into his dance. So far as I'm concerned, it's a moment of curious magic. But "The Time of Your Life" is filled with delightful things, and I'll merely say that it's a pleasure to have it back with us.

"THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE"

Play by William Saroyan; staged by Sanford Meisner; scenery by Watson Barratt; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; costume director, Grace Houston; revived by the New York City Center Theatre Company at the City Center, January 19, 1954. The cast:

The Newsboy.....Art Ostrin
Joe.....Franchot Tone
Arab.....Wolfe Barzell
The Drunkard...Billy M. Greene
Nick.....Myron McCormick
Willie.....Fred Kareman
Tom.....Lonny Chapman
Kitty Duval.....Lenka Peterson
Harry.....Harold Lang
Dudley.....Biff McGuire
Wesley.....Samuel Benskin
Lorene.....Justine Johnston
Blick.....Arthur Jarrett
Mary L.....Carol Grace
Krupp.....Mike Kellin
McCarthy.....John Randolph
Nick's Ma....Rosana San Marco
Kit Carson.....John Carradine
Sailor.....Tom Brannom
Anna.....Linda Berlin
Elsie.....Gloria Vanderbilt
A Street Walker...Betty Bartley
Her Side-Kick....Deris Roberts
A Society Lady..Paula Laurence
A Society Gentleman.....
Albert Whitley
First Cop.....Clifton James
Second Cop.....John Pelletti

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 20, 1955

City Center Meets Saroyan Challenge

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Time of Your Life" is the most difficult thing the City Center has tried to do. That it has succeeded so well is remarkable.

The Saroyan play is an elated criticism of life on the hoof. The author's philosophy is colored by a benevolent lawlessness. It sees the demands and controls of the Twentieth Century as dousing the spirit.

The play makes a tour of elemental emotions. It has no plot. Its cohesion is largely geographical. It is mainly striking for the way it plucks strings you are so used to hearing that you usually ignore their music.

Happens in Bar.

It happens in a bar, but it could be a drugstore or a railroad waiting room. The point is, this is a place where people come in, make some heartfelt impression, and move on.

The company looks as big as the audience in the final line-up. There is no use in trying to explain what they are all up to. Suffice it to say that the play has a unique, sometimes threadbare, often poignant and frequently exciting texture.

Presiding over the passage of humanity are Franchot Tone as a pondering and generous alcholic customer, and Myron McCormick as the unperturbed, soft-hearted bartender.

In and out come Lonny Chapman and Lenka Peterson as an oddly assorted pair of young lovers. He is a hearty, obtuse romantic, who runs errands for Tone. She is a streetwalker with melancholy memories. But they love each other.

Harold Lang dances between the tables, joyous at having his first audience. Biff McGuire is splendidly eager as a young man trying to phone his girl.

John Carradine leers and staggers about as a fable filled replica of Kit Carson. Mike Kellin is fine as a rebellious cop.

Art Ostrin has vigor and a sweet voice for the singing newsboy, and Fred Kareman has a wild and wonderful few minutes when he finally licks the pinball machine.

Much attention was directed at the local debut of Gloria Vanderbilt, playing a bit as a serious-minded nurse. She made a striking entrance, somewhat negated by monotonous and emotionally uncontrolled reading of her few speeches.

Sly Society Lady.

Paula Laurence wrenches a load of sly laughs from the role of a slumming society lady, with an exasperated husband played by Albert Whitley. Betty Bartley bounces through her hilarious moments as a happy tart.

In short, the performances of a talented cast are worth seeing and talking about. The play is like a brilliant author's notebook, crammed with phrases, characters and ideas for a drama he will someday write.

If Saroyan had, nobody would pay half so much attention and the result could not have been half so refreshing or memorable.

Daily Mirror
January 20, 1955

'The Time of Your Life' Is Still Delightful

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"People are wonderful, all of them," argues William Saroyan in "The Time of Your Life," one of the daffiest and most delightful comedies of modern times. Nothing very much happens in the 1939 Pulitzer Prize winner, but that doesn't matter. For it is packed with some of the weirdest and wisest characters ever spawned on a stage.

INTO NICK'S Pacific St. saloon, restaurant and entertainment palace on the San Francisco waterfront wanders an aged and loquacious frontiersman, who tells tall tales of falling in love with a midget that weighs 39 pounds, and of herding cattle on a bicycle on the outskirts of Toledo, O.

Other habitues are a self-taught hoofer, who wants to make the world laugh, and can't; a hungry and proud piano player; a philosophical longshoreman; a streetwalker with a heart of gold; a cop who wishes he had another job; a pinball game addict; a love-smitten swain whose girl friend won't answer the telephone; an amiable lush; a hard-boiled vice-squad dick; and even curious socialites.

The steadiest patron is Joe, a young loafer who always has money because he doesn't worry too much about making it. He drinks champagne, sends his stooge and friend, Tom, out for toys to discover why they made him stop crying as a kid, and pours nickels into a juke box to hear a single sentimental song over and over again.

* * *

IN THE NEW YORK City Theatre Co.'s revival of "The Time of Your Life" at the City Center, Franchot Tone impersonates the understanding Joe with heart and warming sympathy. He is an easy touch, always ready to listen to a hard-luck story or an entertaining lie—a sort of present-day Greek chorus, commenting on the follies, frustrations and dreams of those about him.

Lonny Chapman is his disciple and errand boy to the life. Myron McCormick is vastly amusing, in a dead-pan way, as the kindly proprietor of the joint. John Carradine is fascinating as Kit Carson, the bibulous and blustering Indian fighter.

And deeply appreciative salutes are also due Lenka Peterson, Wolfe Barzell, Billy M. Greene, Harold Lang, Biff McGuire, Samuel Benskin, Mike Kellin, Arthur Jarrett, John Randolph, Paula Laurence and Betty Bartley. A society page touch was added by the presence in the cast of Gloria Vanderbilt Stokowski, Linda Berlin and Carol Grace.

This cosmic minstrel show, with Tone as interlocutor to some of the most cockeyed end men who ever trod the boards, is a sheer joy. Packed with imagination, rich characterization and a feeling for the dignity of mankind, it offers one of the most rewarding evenings you could possibly want in a theatre. Another triumph for the New York City Theatre Company!

Journal American
January 20, 1955

Saroyan Play Rates Its High Evaluation

By JOHN McCLAIN

THEATRE-GOERS ARE RATHER sharply divided on the merits of William Saroyan as a playwright and the importance of his principal play, "Time of Your Life." I have always been one of the pro-Saroyanites, although the years since 1939, when it was produced here, have fogged-up the precise reasons for this high evaluation.

It was gratifying, then, to see it once more—this time at City Center with an extremely capable cast—and to reaffirm one's faith in the product.

It is no easier today than it was fifteen years ago to put into simple words what the play is all about; it is about life and people, to be sure, with the insinuation that most of us are crazy. But it is told with such gentle realism, moods and moments of depth and beauty, that one comes away not caring whether it proves anything or not.

Odd Assortment

Into Nick's saloon on the San Francisco waterfront pour an incredible assortment of characters: a wealthy young drunk who buys drinks for the customers and studies life through a champagne haze; his devoted stooge and errand boy; an unhappy trollop and two happy ones; a pair of young lovers; a dancer, a piano player; one bad cop, one good cop; a literate longshoreman, and half-a-dozen subordinate figures.

Their lives intertwine briefly, some with purpose and others merely for a passing line or laugh.

A lady of forgotten refinement is generated in an episode of simple poignancy; a lad waiting for the phone to ring is finally rewarded, a flamboyant ex-Indian fighter finds a haven of free drink and a ready audience; a tart reforms and discovers true love; a sadistic detective is shot to death.

All this to strains of "The Missouri Waltz," and sandwiched between the entrance and exits of drunks, sailors, a newsboy, an inveterate pinball player, a couple of society slummers, an Arab and the other residents of the neighborhood.

It is an impossible melange of drama, pathos, comedy and double-talk, but the fact remains that Saroyan can, and most of the time does, write with such grace and tenderness that an almost theological mood pervades the proceedings.

Key to Play

Probably the best scene, and possibly the key to most of the play, is the one in which the cop goes on about how we're all nice people, just trying to do the best we can, but we must be crazy or we wouldn't make so much trouble among ourselves.

I daresay a lot of symbolism can be read into all of this, but I'll guarantee no two people's symbols would agree.

In the large cast Franchot Tone, as the lush philanthropist, easily dominates the action and reveals again, after too many years, that he is a serious performer of proportion and assurance.

He is brilliantly supported by Lonny Chapman, as his first lieutenant, and Lenka Peterson, as the remorseful prostitute. Myron McCormick, covering with an apron the midriff he exposed for so many seasons in "South Pacific," makes an amiable and philosophical Nick; John Carradine is generally hilarious as the sodden Old Scout.

Gloria Vanderbilt does remarkably well in a short love scene with Biff McGuire, and other meritorious contributions are offered by Mike Kellin, as the kindly cop; John Randolph, as the longshoreman; Harold Lang, Wolfe Barzell, Billy M. Greene, Fred Kareman, Samuel Benskin, Arthur Jarrett, Paula Lawrence, as a lady of quality, and Linda Berlin.

Sanford Meisner handled the complex movements of the large company with unpretentious skill; and Watson Barratt provided a bleak and imaginative single set representing the beat-up bar-room.

Yes, this is still quite a play; I don't know why, but it is.

DAILY NEWS
January 20, 1955

Fine Cast in 'Time of Your Life' Brings Great Warmth to Stage

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Life's old sweet song is being sung again by William Saroyan, and the theatre is a very great deal the better for it. Last evening they revived Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life" at the City Center, and for me it was even more enchanting than it was on the first opening night, back in 1939. A splendid cast, artfully directed by Sanford Meisner, makes this comic fantasy a simple delight, warming the heart and inciting affectionate chuckles and lusty laughter.

There would be no sense in trying to tell what "The Time of Your Life" is about—at least not in a paragraph or two—because I don't believe Saroyan yet knows what it is about himself. All his writing life he has been blessed and handicapped at the same time with a furious urge to write off the top of his head. This play is the best of the top of Saroyan's head. Artistically, it is no more disciplined than a small, hell-raising boy; but in its effect it is a lot like a small boy filled with fun and affection and scampering hither and thither.

They All Come In

The setting is a saloon near the Embarcadero in San Francisco. It isn't a dreary saloon like Eugene O'Neill's dive in "The Iceman Cometh," where there was no hope; it is a lively joint where everybody is hopeful and decent in his fashion, from the socialite to the prostitute and from the newsboy to the uniformed cop. Here sits a man named Joe who keeps stewed on champagne as he watches life come down the stairs and go up the stairs which lead to the Pacific St. sidewalk.

Many of those whom Joe encounters he befriends — such as his lunkheaded man Friday and a sweet and lonely harlot (for to an unreconstructed sentimentalist like Saroyan, scarlet is a becoming color to women). The others whom Joe encounters he watches —an old fraud of a plainsman, a kid with a gift for hoofing, a vice cop up to no good, an inarticulate Greek immigrant and a patient bartender among them.

A Perfect Cast

Somehow, something happens to to all these people, and they all say something which is interesting, touching or funny. Says one, when he is given a nickel to spend, "What I want is a cup of coffee and a good used car." Says the bartender about his joint, "Maybe they just don't feel at home any place else." And the grandest opening speech any stage character ever had is the plainsman's "Did you ever fall in love with a midget weighing 39 pounds?"

The New York City Theatre Company has put together a cast which is just about perfect, with Franchot Tone as the champagne philosopher, shrewd but kindly; Lonny Chapman as his dumb but eager stooge, Lenka Peterson as the extremely affecting young prostitute, Myron McCormick as the bartender and John Carradine as the marvelously picturesque plainsman. Then there are Harold Lang as the would-be dancer, Mike Kellin as a philosophical patrolman and Paula Laurence as a society lady.

Many other players come and go, doing their bit with their bits. One of them is Gloria Vanderbilt, in the role of a young nurse in search of her boy friend. Last evening Miss Vanderbilt was handsome but nervous. Another young lady in an even smaller role is Linda Berlin, Irving's daughter.

Don't miss "The Time of Your Life."

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
January 20, 1955

THEATER

'The Time of Your Life'

By WALTER F. KERR

The Best People

Jean Dalrymple, who has been nursing City Center through an exceptionally ingratiating season, has rounded up the cast of the year for "The Time of Your Life."

Sitting at the right-hand table in Nick's Pacific Street Saloon is Franchot Tone, buying up a newsboy's papers and hearing them over his shoulder, sending out for jelly beans that taste just as good as they always did, and ruefully regretting the children he never had—especially the dumb one. (Mr. Tone plays with a bemused and quiet irony, interrupted by flashes of an almost boyish hysteria).

• • •

Behind the bar is Myron McCormick, bitterly lamenting the fifty cents he has shot on a no-good horse, furiously denouncing himself for crying like a baby over music he doesn't understand, and keeping a fond but watchful eye on "the cowboys and Indians, the cops and robbers, the longshoremen and finks" who stride, dance, reel and stomp through the premises. (Mr. McCormick's jaundiced right eye and snarling voice are in wonderful working order).

• • •

Among the boozy, breezy, and generally tatterdemalion children that the Messrs. Tone and McCormick take under their respective wings are: Harold Lang as an exceptionally sad comedian who bites his nails when he isn't hoofing to Samuel Benskin's impish piano (Mr. Lang's dancing is fine, his vocal attack a bit fuzzy); Biff McGuire as a passionate suitor who is shaken at the mere thought of telephoning his girl (a first-rate young comedian, Mr. McGuire); and Lonny Chapman as a seedy errand-boy with a heart full of love. (Add one more energetic and engaging performance.

• • •

At regular intervals William Saroyan's now-famous saloon doors swing open to admit further variations on our unpredictable species, all of them played by performers of some renown. Triumphant among them is Paula Laurence, an enameled daughter of the Medici wearing two-ton earrings and rising like a shot to rip off a few bars of the Salvation Army hymn. Scoring a slightly ambiguous victory is Gloria Vanderbilt, making her Broadway debut in a three-minute bit. To dwell on Miss Vanderbilt's physical charms is unnecessary; it may be added that she has unquestionably learned how to make an entrance—those bar doors swing open and stay swung open as the young lady hangs on for the count—and that she is prepared to tackle one of Saroyan's more exotic creations with plenty of emphasis. The role isn't long enough to lead a reviewer into further analysis, or any sort of prophecy.

• • •

On the disappointing side is John Carradine, stalking the stage on hinged knees as the fabled Kit Carson who once herded cows on a bicycle and is perfectly prepared to pack seven cartridges into a six-shooter. Mr. Carradine's performance is all outline—this fellow once had a cantankerous soul, as I remember it—and the pacing is as droopy as his trailing white mustachios. Lenka Peterson, too, has trouble in pinning down the fleeting charm of a lissome blonde tramp with a chip on her shoulder.

And if I had to pick out my favorite moments in a friendly evening, I'd say that quite a few of them came not from the "names" but from the also-rans. There's a dandy sequence in which Mike Kellen, a baffled cop who "just takes orders," threatens to quit and let somebody else run the lousy world. There's another in which longshoreman John Randolph decides that the world's troubles all stem from people who want to be poets, couldn't be, and got even by becoming important heels. For a third, let's list a few seconds of suddenly striking mood-work in which a Greek newsboy tries out his "great lyric tenor" on "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

• • •

This last moment leads us to the one real qualification that must be made about City Center's revival of the still perfectly lively, amiably lunatic, Saroyan improvisation. The successful passages of offbeat humor, and left-field sentiment, don't quite blend. The play is designed as a continuous performance in which bits of the real world merge imperceptibly, in which rhythm rather than logic ties everything together. The transitions are perceptible here; the river-like current of rhetoric, jokes, tributes, reminiscences and regrets is allowed to flow sluggishly now and then, and sometimes to be dammed up altogether. This is no doubt due to a quick rehearsal schedule, and I imagine that in a night or two Mr. Saroyan's almost musical structure will be getting the sensitive orchestration it deserves. Even now, it's good listening.

The New York Times

January 20, 1955

Theatre: Saroyan of a Happier Day

His 'Time of Your Life' Revived at City Center

IN reviving William Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life" Wednesday night, the City Center has rendered a valuable service to all those who love and treasure the theatre. Indeed, it is good to behold and hear again this ode to the human race that Mr. Saroyan penned in the flush of his youth and enthusiasm.

Looking at the world back in 1939, even as the nations teetered on the edge of the precipice, this undisciplined playwright from whom so much more was expected and of whose works so little has been seen since, was able to take the bright and compassionate view of the life he saw around him. "The Time of Your Life," original and full of human understanding, remains a lovely work of poetry.

As you will recall, nothing much really happens in this play. There hardly is the thread of a story to hold it together. The setting is Nick's Pacific Street Saloon, Restaurant and Entertainment Palace near the San Francisco waterfront. Into this honkytonk wander a variety of human beings, some aimless, some jaded, some full of aspiration and dreams. There is the kindly saloonkeeper, the street walker, the cop, a longshoreman, a hoofer, a piano player. They talk, they argue, they probe. What they say is wistful, argumentative, sad and happy. Mr. Saroyan, looking into their hearts, recorded what simple people think and feel and say. This is what holds the play together.

•

If the performance, under Sanford Meisner's direction, has lost something of the magic that memory recalls pervaded the original Theatre Guild production, the blame, perhaps, should be charged off to the limitations under which the Fifty-fifth Street organization operates. It is to be expected that before the fortnight's engagement is over this deficiency will be properly treated. For, although "The Time of Your Life" is a reverie, it has a tone that Wednesday night seemed to come through only sporadically.

Franchot Tone Depicts Good-Hearted Loafer

In the central role of Joe, a "young loafer with money and a good heart," to use Mr. Saroyan's own description, is Franchot Tone. Joe also has some ideas about life, ideas of which he is not completely sure. This uncertainty Mr. Tone interprets correctly though not with all the compassion and pensiveness that he should. This department wishes he would get just a little more of the sadness into the part, a little more of genuine sympathy. Lenka Peterson gives a nice portrayal of the street walker with memories. She is sensuous, poignant and tender.

•

Others in this grand collection of characters who have their penetrating moments are Myron McCormick, the kindly owner of the saloon; Lonny Chapman, Joe's stooge and admirer who is carried away by love; Harold Lang as the hoofer who wants to make people laugh and can't; John Randolph, the longshoreman who tries to understand life along with his dumb friend, the cop, played by Mike Kellin.

John Carradine as the braggart in buckskin, the teller of tall tales, livens the proceedings, as do Biff McGuire, the frantic young man in pursuit of his girl and Fred Kareman, the marble-game maniac who triumphs over a pinball machine. As for Gloria Vanderbilt, who is making her debut on the New York stage, she has little more than a walk-on role and your correspondent is not yet in a position to predict the future of her thespian career.

For all its unorthodoxy and in spite of the shortcomings of the present production, "The Time of Your Life" is worth cherishing. L. F.

"Festival"

New York Herald Tribune

January 19, 1955

THEATER

'Festival'

By WALTER F. KERR

Musical Menagerie

I IMAGINE all the jokes in "Festival" would be funny if the first one was. The new rumpus at the Longacre is the kind of comedy in which some one tells an embarrassing little fib, which causes some one else to tell an embarrassing little fib, which causes some one else to believe in it, which causes an outraged father to doubt the legitimacy of his own son. Oh, the tangled web we weave when we make that first lame gag!

• • •

Authors Sam and Bella Spewack are no strangers to farce, as admirers of their raucously lunatic "Boy Meets Girl" well know. Given an attractive and funny premise, they can pile misunderstanding upon misunderstanding with maniacal ingenuity, until the whole breathless improvisation teeters like a pile of building blocks. The trouble with the new one is that the bottom block is wobbly.

Betty Field, playing a prim but pushy music teacher, shoves through the open patio doors of Paul Henreid's Beverly Hills home. Mr. Henreid is, we are given to understand, a concert manager who loathes music and who cannot get his most temperamental pianist to keep a scheduled date in Mexico. In some fashion or other—my memory is clogged with later complications—Mr. Henreid lights upon the notion that if he can persuade his recalcitrant star that Miss Field is his former and forgotten mistress, and that the prodigy is his briefly begotten son, the pianist will take off for Mexico pronto.

• • • •

From this point on, I think, the Spewacks—and all those who work for them—are in trouble. It's not that the authors can't deliver the full quota of surprise twists, or a modest number of incidental laughs along the way. Everything happens: the pianist decides to claim his 'son,' two other citizens turn up to claim him just as passionately, Miss Field finds herself floating about in a borrowed negligee, dropping champagne glasses, and murmuring "Call me lascivious—aren't we all?" Between times a chess-playing Japanese butler puts on his hat and departs in a huff, a college professor with a wavering hearing-aid misconstrues whole conversations, and a flamboyant lady cellist resents being asked to play her instrument side-saddle. As you can see, the jests and the japery mount. But because that first little fabrication never seemed especially delightful, especially ironic, or even especially necessary, the whirlwind that follows has no center at all.

• • • •

Betty Field is much too good an actress for the empty and

"FESTIVAL"

Comedy by Sam and Bella Spewack; staged by Albert Marre; scenery and lighting by Robert O'Hearn; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by Walter Fried in association with Felix Brentano at the Longacre Theatre, January 18, 1955. The cast:

Sally Ann Peters.....Betty Field
Wong.....Harry Shaw Lowe
Joey Foster..Abbott Lee Ruskin
Max Granada.....Paul Henreid
Ruby.....Patricia Englund
Sasha Rostov..George Voskovec
Martova.....Luba Malina
Joe Foster.....Pat Hingle
Emily Foster.....Ann Barlow
Dr. Algernon Burton.....James Reese
A Boy.....Leslie Alan Blatt

rather trying postures she is put to, and you can almost see her eyes darting about the stage looking for a snatch of material to work over. She does find some room for antic invention. There is a miraculous limpness, for instance, in her abandoned gestures as she tries to conceive of herself as "a woman of the world." And she makes the same vein of innocent ineptitude immensely funny on a couple of other occasions: in a demure little trot across the stage as her scarlet background is discovered, in a wonderfully feeble slap with which she responds to Mr. Henreid's first kiss.

Mr. Henreid, too, is possessed of talents which "Festival" fails to call into play. The actor's nonchalance is ingratiating, his sardonic smirk effectively wry; but the Spewacks have confined him to sending fake telegrams of no very hilarious inspiration, to shouting at the temperamental souls who clutter up his living-room, and to sitting cross-legged on a table while he waits for the house of cards to fall.

* * *

Luba Malina, in two short appearances as a cellist who was once "Siberia's Sweetheart," drains considerable fun out of some rococo fabrications. George Voskovec does handsomely by a great deal of familiar artistic rant, young Abbott Lee Ruskin actually plays a few bars of Mozart before he is shooed from the piano, and Patricia Englund and Ann Barlow are decorative. Albert Marre's stage direction is fast and slick, and Robert O'Hearn's blue-domed solarium is a suitably garish background for the gaudy, but mechanical, goings-on.

Daily Mirror

January 19, 1955

Spewacks' 'Festival' Opens At Longacre Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Even the best of playwrights have an off night, and Sam and Bella Spewack had theirs at the Longacre Theatre Tuesday evening. For about two and a half hours, they banged out the changes on temperament and illegitimacy with all the finesse of blacksmiths. The result was an incredible farce called "Festival."

It seems that a temperamental impresario wanted a temperamental pianist and a temperamental cellist to play dates in Mexico and Texas. When the egocentric imitation of Paderewski rebelled, the deceitful manager foisted a child prodigy and his advocate—a pure teacher of psychology—off on him as his own.

SO THE PRODIGY'S real papa began to have doubts and looked up a divorce lawyer. Well, to make a long story short, the keyboard whiz went to Mexico, while the impresario decided to find out whether the pretty young psychologist could be as deceitful as himself. That's putting it briefly, which is what we prefer to do.

Walter Fried, in association with Felix Brentano, is sponsoring the curious charade. Fried knows his way about the show shops, and has given "Festival" the advantages of some excellent name players and a set by Robert O'Hearn that had the first-nighters applauding lustily before the stage hands had gotten the curtain to the top of the proscenium.

Paul Henreid and Betty Field, two usually accomplished players, blared out their suggestive gags as if they wanted to get them over quickly, and forget them as soon as possible. George Voskovec, another able trouper, whacked the blazes out of his suggestive sallies with remarkable verve and speed.

Harry Shaw Lowe, our favorite Chinese disciple of Thespis; Patricia Englund, Abbott Lee Ruskin, Pat Hingle, Ann Barlow, James Reese and Leslie Alan Blatt also proved adept with the slapstick. Only Luba Malina was able to cash in on her opportunities in the Spewacks' frantic frolic. She was genuinely funny on occasion.

DIRECTOR ALBERT MARRE, who has given us some fine Shakespearean revivals in his time, seemed determined that if "Festival" was not good, it should be good and loud. No one in the farthest reaches of the capacious Longacre could complain about not hearing the dubious dialogue.

For some reason, "Festival" caught the fancy of many of its first Broadway customers. They laughed uproariously, as if they were listening to the choicest of Shavian wit, and applauded as robustly as if they were welcoming a really amusing and imaginative work. There's just no accounting for tastes.

Frankly, we were embarrassed for much of the evening by the bruising burlesque. Our sensibilities should be black and blue this morning from the Spewacks' sock-'em-and-rock-'em assaults on art and artists. How could you, Sam and Bella? Shades of "Kiss Me Kate!"

New York Post

January 19, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Are Musicians Hilarious People?

Unless Sam and Bella Spewack are being inaccurate, which is unlikely, musicians aren't any funnier than other people. In their new play, "Festival," which opened last night at the Longacre Theater, these experienced authors of comedies about the antics of the more eccentric professions have gone into the lives of the pianists, cellists, prodigies, teachers, composers and managers with their customary playwriting thoroughness, as well as with the highest hopes, but they have come up with the melancholy information that music people can be extremely dull.

It certainly isn't from lack of trying. Everyone connected with "Festival," from the authors to the director and the actors, labors with ardor, ingenuity and the most splendid determination. The men and women of the play are always in an uproar of some kind or other, and they are to be found being temperamental, amorous, indignant, gay, astonished, bewildered, soulful, brooding and resigned in turn. There are also occasions when they grow fairly whimsical. So far as I'm concerned, the one trouble is that they're rarely entertaining.

The Pattern

If there is considerable familiarity in the pattern of the new comedy, it is because the Spewacks have employed the same design in devising certain other plays about such fellow eccentrics of the musical people as the journalists and the movie-makers. There is the same conviction that all the practitioners of these popular arts are a little mad, very picturesque and given to turning on and off their emotions when they have served their purposes. They are constantly engaged in skulduggery of some sort, but, basically, most of them are loveable.

It is a pattern that worked out admirably in such an attractive comedy as "Boy Meets Girl," which was concerned with Hollywood. That was a very funny play, and "Festival," I'm afraid, isn't. Possibly the difference is that the movie people are essentially more comic than those preoccupied with music, and are better subjects for amiably malicious satire. But I think there is more to it than that. I imagine the chief trouble is that in the new play the formula is there, but the hilarious lines and racy characters are missing.

The Details

I confess to a little difficulty in trying to set down the necessary plot details. The manager is striving to get the pianist off to Mexico for a concert. A girl teacher is attempting to get the manager to give her prodigy-pupil an audition. The lady cellist claims that she once had an affair with the pianist. The pianist is led to believe that the prodigy is his son. All in all, there is quite a lot of activity, and it sometimes verges on the confusing, but I fear more ingenuity than wit has gone into the play's manufacture.

There are, as always in the theater these days, a number of excellent players in the cast, including Betty Field as the teacher, George Voskovec as the pianist, Paul Henreid as the manager and Luba Malina as the cellist. As much as I admire all of them, I must say that I have seen them happier in other roles. Indeed, it was my impression last night that only Pat Hingle, in the small part of the prosaic and presumably dull-witted father of the prodigy, managed to achieve a three-dimensional characterization. I can't say I enjoyed "Festival."

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 19, 1955

'Festival' Shows Expert Touch

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Festival," a chain stitch of laughs, loops through the evening at the Longacre with raffish impertinence.

If its craftsmanship shows, be grateful. This is a comedy put together with expert know-how.

There have been several other fun-loving frolics this season, generous with their gags. None of them had the multiple misunderstanding, the logic of character or the constant replenishment of invention that "Festival" has.

You know the one about the innocent girl in the nest of lecherous vipers who lies about her sophistication. This time, for once, she is neither phony nor a bore.

Nest of Musicians.

Betty Field plays a youthful music teacher with a prodigy on her hands. To launch his career, she roosts in the nest of a ruthless impresario. His chicks are mad musicians.

To guarantee her young charge his first concert, Miss Field proves herself as deceitful, as charming and sometimes a good deal funnier than the professionals.

She freely alleges the paternity of her white hope, then denies it as glibly. She ends up winning the heart of the small-time Hurok.

Miss Field looks about 20, maybe 21. She spoofs the innocent character she is playing as neatly as she does the raging sophisticates about her.

It is all done with gaiety, freshness and subtlety that paints a real bloom on a rough-and-ready setup.

Aloof Magnetism.

Paul Henreid is the impresario, something of a straight man, and a backbone for the wild story. He is light in spirit and agile in manner. Yet he still projects that aloof magnetism that wins him such hordes of film fans.

In this generation there is a type of role which might well be known as a Luba Malina part. It has a heavy accent in a tempest of insulting humor. It needs deadly aim and a trouper's timing. All this is what Miss Malina gives the heavily scoring role of a cellist.

The pianist played by George Voscovec is in a similar category. This genius has more variations and facets than the cellist. He is more talented, more mad, more irritating and more naive. Mr. Voscovec paints the keyboard king with all these variations and more.

Honest Casting.

The other players are cast with honest suitability to the rarified atmosphere of the farce. Pat Hingle is particularly truthful as a bulk-headed Venetian blind salesman who belatedly doubts his wife's loyalty.

Young Abbott Lee Ruskin plays the piano like a mature whiz. He gazes on his elders' shenanigans with the bored slouch of an ancient and tolerant pawnbroker.

"Festival" is hardly historic. The Spewacks have set out to entrance by entertaining. Their diversion is intricate, professional and utterly expert.

DAILY NEWS

January 19, 1955

Betty Field and Paul Henreid Try Hard to Make 'Festival' Festive

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "Festival," which opened last evening at the Longacre Theatre, two old hands at writing funny stuff, Sam and Bella Spewack, have sought to write a farce about the concert racket. Now and then they provide some amusing situations and witty lines, and any comedy with Betty Field as its heroine has much in its favor; but even so "Festival" falls short of its aim and my hopes.

The reason it falls short is that I never was made to care whether George Voskovec, playing a temperamental Russian pianist, ever got off to Mexico from Beverly Hills for a concert date at a big music festival. Everybody tries to ship him off in time and he thinks of reasons for not going—and last evening I found myself agreeing with him all the way. As a character—but not as an actor, for Voscovec is pleasant enough—he wasn't worth all the fuss.

A Valiant Plot

And the Spewacks have manufactured quite a fuss. It begins with Paul Henreid playing a West Coast impresario—which in plain language means a concert booking agent—in a grand manner and a thick accent. In comes Miss Field, a nice little schoolma'am, trying to get an audition for a small boy pianist. Present, somehow, is Luba Malina, who is much more intelligently constructed than the cello she plays.

Indeed, Miss Malina is better constructed than the Spewacks' farce, for she still is in one piece at curtain-fall and the play has disjointed itself by trying too hard. "Festival" is too desperate an attempt to be naughty but nice as it tells of Miss Field's valiant plot to convince the great pianist that the little boy she has in tow is the result of a momentary romance between her and the pianist some years ago. Miss Field is too sweet a girl to fool anybody with a line like this, even in a farce. But I must say that when she is trying to be artful and deceptive she is quite funny; she is a comedienne with a special quiet skill.

Poor Old Texas

There is another amusing performance by Pat Hingle as an honest lowbrow among dishonest low-lifes. Voskovec works hard at being temperamental, and Henreid doesn't have enough hard work to do in the role of a California Hurok. There is a splendid, elaborate set by Robert O'Hearn of a neo-Spanish mansion, and I am relieved to learn from the back of program that Miss Malina's foundation garments are by Lily of France.

No comedy is without its merits if it contains a line calling Texas the Siberia of America, but even so I don't think the Spewacks have succeeded in lampooning the concert industry as well as Harry Kurnitz taunted the art racket in "Reclining Figure."

The New York Times
January 19, 1955

Stage: Spewack Spoof

World of Music Bears Brunt in 'Festival'

TUESDAY night it was the turn of the music world to be lampooned on a Broadway stage. In the hands of the Spewacks, Bella and Samuel, veterans in the art of fun-making, the subject offered promising possibilities. Unfortunately, the performance was not equal to the promise. Their "Festival," which opened at the Longacre, is more labored than mirthful, the hilarity more imagined than real. Somewhere along the line inventiveness gave way to intricate contrivance.

For their purported shenanigans the Spewacks are telling of a young music teacher who is intent on getting a hearing for one of her pupils who she is convinced is a prodigy equal to the boy Mozart. She invades an impresario's home and bends all her energies to trying to convince the fellow to give the boy a hearing. The impresario, however, is beset with his own problems, particularly that of getting one of his artists to perform at a music festival in Mexico. How he uses the music teacher and the predicaments that ensue form the basis for the spoofing.

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Undoubtedly the Spewacks conceived of the situation as presenting limitless opportunities for farce. But even farce requires a certain credibility. When they try to have the music teacher pose as the erstwhile mistress who has had a child by the troublesome musician it taxes belief to the point of strain.

Since the Spewacks are professionals the evening has some redeeming moments. Occasionally there are flashes of witty writing and several scenes do provoke laughter: when the Chinese man-servant decides he has lost face and quits and in quitting walks out with his chessboard; when the eccentric pianist and the female 'cellist who also inhabits the impresario's home, insult each other's talents; when a father believes that his wife has been unfaithful to him. These are humorously conceived and written. But in between, stretches of aridity as well as incredibility take over.

Robert O'Hearn has provided a luxurious sunroom, ornate and spacious enough for farce. Under Albert Marre's direction the players strive to give the proceedings a semblance of hilarity. As the female 'cellist, Luba Malina is superb. She brightens up the stage whenever she has the chance. Full of the volatility of a temperamental artist, she is in turn wild, vain, furious and the center of the universe. Equally egomaniacal is George Voskovec, the hypochondriac pianist who does not want to fulfill his contract in Mexico because he fears the altitude.

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Betty Field has the role of the music teacher who is ready to do almost anything to get her prodigy his chance. Miss Field is an accomplished comedienne and her pretenses at being an innocent lass trapped in a world of sophisticates are courageous as she endeavors to believe in what she is doing. Paul Henreid, who has been absent from Broadway since 1940, when he appeared here in "Flight to the West," plays the deceitful impresario with energy and proper worldliness. Abbott Lee Ruskin is the 8-year-old prodigy. Master Ruskin is not an actor yet but he does play the piano nicely.

In any event, the music world can breathe easily this morning. "Festival" is more frenetic than festive.

L. F.

Journal-American
January 19, 1955

Tangled Plot Spoils the Fun

Spewack Story Has Hilarity And Is Well-Played by Cast

By JOHN McCLAIN

WE HAVE BEEN TREATED this season to several pseudo-comedies which took a ten-minute situation and attempted through gags, bits, and variety turns, to string it into a full-length evening in the theatre. Last night, in "Festival," the new Sam and Bella Spewack effort which opened at the Longacre, we have the reverse.

Here we have enough plot and peregrination for three plays, with the result that much which is hilarious becomes smothered under a fabric of interwoven story lines.

At one point a California-type salesman for an aluminum window blind concern finds himself plunged into the vortex of the plot, and turns to an old friend for a simple explanation of what's been going on.

The answer didn't make much sense to him—it wasn't supposed to—but I'm afraid his bewilderment was shared by many in the audience.

Prefer to Drift

The customers are willing to work to solve a whodunit, but for comedy I believe they prefer to drift along with an uncomplicated vehicle which blows a loud whistle at the approach of a laugh and never slows up long enough to give anybody a close look at the landscape.

In "Festival" the Spewacks have invaded the home of an impresario who can save himself from financial destruction only by sending a highly temperamental pianist to Mexico for an important concert.

But the client hates trains and claims ill-health as an excuse for not flying. Enter, at this point, a music teacher with a piano prodigy for whom she wishes to arrange a recital.

There is not space in anybody's newspaper to tell you how this is finally achieved, but I can give you a clue.

The teacher pretends the lad is her illegitimate son, via the pianist. That sounds simple enough: but it does not include a Russian cellist, the boy's true parents, a music professor with a hearing aid who has written a concerto for the left hand, a Chinese butler who excels at chess and, out of left field, another boy prodigy who looks a great deal like the original.

Many Laughs

Along the trail there are many solid and sustained laughs, and there are scenes which deserved inclusion in a less confused entity.

Paul Henreid gives a forthright and assured impersonation as the musical impresario, but I must submit that I thought Betty Field was miscast as the intellectual protagonist of the boy phenomenon. Skilled as she is, it didn't seem she was comfortable in the role.

On the other hand, George Voskovec, had a delightful romp as the impassioned pianist; and Luba Malina dominated her several scenes in the part of the cellist. Other estimable contributions were offered by Harry Shaw Lowe, Patricia Englund, Pat Hingle, Ann Barlow, James Reese and, of course, Abbott Lee Ruskin, the first prodigy and, Leslie Alan Blatt, the second.

I thought Albert Marre's direction was unobtrusive and usually sound, and I suppose there are Beverly Hills sun rooms like the one Robert O'Hearn has devised, although it has been my good fortune never to have been caught in one.

So much of "Festival" is bright and funny; it's a sorry shame it gets snarled in its own streamers.

"The Doctor' Dilemma"

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

January 12, 1955

Phoenix at Its Best With Shaw Satire

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The Phoenix Theater gives an impeccable production to Shaw's "The Doctor's Dilemma."

One of the wittiest plays in the language, this brilliant jape is directed at pomposity in the medical profession and the hidebound inflexibility with which the world greets genius.

Shaw is always on the side of the remarkable person. Equally he loves to blast ordinary morality. In "The Doctor's Dilemma" his ironic arguments spiral like pinwheels.

The dilemma visited on the medicine man here is whether to save the life of an unscrupulous genius artist or an ordinary, honest little doctor.

As always with Shaw, motives are never straightforward. The remarkable painter has a beautiful wife. Before the play is over, the doctor is all but bragging that he made her a widow so she would be happy.

Rich Fabric.

The fun is endless and complex, and the fabric of the play is very rich. This company plays all its values to the expert hilt. Emotional scenes are genuinely moving. They are so legitimate that it is possible to hoot with laughter in the middle of a moving death scene, without destroying either mood.

Sidney Lumet directs the play in an inventive, vivid style. Klaus Holm has designed clever sets that permit the five acts to move rapidly.

As for the cast, it is excellent to the smallest role. Geraldine Fitzgerald is luminous, impassioned and humorous as the beautiful, loyal wife of the painter. One of the evening's joys is Roddy McDowall's ingenious contribution as her wicked, talented consort. The layers of charlatan and artist, of phony and dedicated creator are superbly distinguished in his characterization.

Choice of Lives.

Shepperd Strudwick is the cool and handsome medico whose limited supply of serum makes him choose which life he will save. His fellow physicians are most humorously portrayed by Frederic Worlock, crusty and memorable as the talkative advocate of white blood corpuscles; Will Kuluva as a temperamental surgeon; Philip Bourneuf, an elderly MD in retirement, and Vaughn Taylor in the role of a Jewish doctor, through whom Shaw makes some of his most destroying witticisms.

"THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA"

Play by Bernard Shaw; staged by Sidney Lumet; scenery and lighting by Klaus Holm; costumes by Alvin Colt; revived by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, January 11, 1955. The cast:

Redpenny.... Frederic Warriner
Emmy.... Betty Sinclair
Sir Colenso Ridgeon.... Shepperd Strudwick
Dr. Schutzmacher.. Vaughn Taylor
Sir Patrick Cullen.... Philip Bourneuf
Cutler Walpole.... Will Kuluva
Sir Ralph Bloomfield Bonington.. Frederic Worlock
Dr. Blenkinsop.... Milton Selzer
Jennifer Dubedat.... Geraldine Fitzgerald
Louis Dubedat... Roddy McDowall
Minnie Tinwell.... Peggy Pope
Walter.... David Hooks
Newspaper Man.. Arthur Anderson
Secretary.... Fritz Weaver

The New York Times

January 12, 1955

Theatre: 'The Doctor's Dilemma'

Play by Bernard Shaw Revived at Phoenix

By BROOKS ATKINSON

EVERYTHING is present and accounted for in the Phoenix' production of "The Doctor's Dilemma" (which opened last evening) excepting for one vital ingredient. The sardonic crackle of G. B. Shaw is missing.

This is a little surprising, for the cast is excellent individually and the production is one of the Phoenix' best. Geraldine Fitzgerald is a beautiful and affecting wife to the blackguard artist. Some of her scenes of pleading or devotion are astonishingly moving, in view of the fact that they occur in a Shaw play.

As Sir Ralph Bloomfield Bonington, the charlatan society doctor, Frederic Worlock gives a superb performance in the grand manner of Shaw. His bombast, his sentimentality and his sweeping gestures are enormously funny. The other doctors who trifle learnedly with the lives of their patients are played by good actors, too. Shepperd Strudwick's bachelor doctor is pleasant and sincere though not particularly Shavian.

Philip Bourneuf's venerable skeptic who is not convinced of the omniscience of the medical profession; Will Kuluva's fanatical, egocentric surgeon; Vaughn Taylor's Jewish doctor with an amused relish of the stuffy British character, and Milton Selzer's bumbling failure who has nothing left but a bedside manner—are good representatives of Shaw's restless mind. As the outrageous artistic genius, Roddy McDowall is in fine fettle.

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When they are all put together, however, they do not make a Shaw play. Under Sidney Lumet's direction, they give a rambling performance that is brisk and satirical only in spots. In the fourth act, when the artist is dying, they act as if they thought they were playing honest old John Galsworthy.

In the program "The Doctor's Dilemma" is labeled a tragedy. No doubt this shows a very decent respect for the death of an artist, babbling of painters and beauty. Archer had said that Shaw could never be considered a first-rate dramatist until he had written a death scene. Here it is, with a full bill of particulars.

But the death of a character was nothing to put Shaw off his stride. It's quite a tart death-scene in fact; it faces facts in good spirit and it proudly preserves the iconoclastic creed of the ideal artist. The actors stand around in morbid attitudes, but the lines are full of intellectual vitality.

For "The Doctor's Dilemma" is basically a satiric pamphlet about the humbug of the medical profession. Skepticism about medicine is the impulse that drew Shaw to the play, and it needs to be acted con brio, with salt, impudence and gaiety.

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It is possible that the Phoenix company will pick up the tempo in future performances. The actors are present; only the spirit is wanting. At least a theatregoer can go on hoping. For "The Doctor's Dilemma" is a sparkling drama with a real problem—a doctor's attempt to decide whether the life of a certain patient is worth saving when a lot of sick people are competing for medical attention.

It's quite an ethical problem. Shaw discusses it with more vivacity than the Phoenix actors.